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ABSTRACT

Halloween costumes may be used to examine the influence violent models have on children. On Halloween evening observers recorded the frequency of violent and nonviolent costumes worn by children. When all of the data are inspected they suggest that children confronted with several aggressive models may be more likely to identify with the "good guy." Data of this type can never show cause and effect, but they do suggest that children find violent models attractive. It is possible that identification with these models causes the child to adopt the models' attitudes or philosophy even though the aggressive behavior is not copied. (BN)

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Halloween Costumes May Suggest Influence of Violent Models on Children

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Research activity during the '60s and '70s has tried to determine the effects of viewed aggression on the observer's behavior. These studies have stemmed in part from a concern over the influence of violence depicted through TV on the behavior of children. A related but separate question involves the cognitive or attitudinal changes which may result. Exposure to routinely violent characters on TV and in the movies may cause a child to assume that violence is more acceptable or more prevalent than his/her real-world experiences would suggest. These attitudinal consequences may exist in the absence of any overt aggressive behavior and may persist much longer than the aggressive behaviors frequently found to result from viewing violence.

Although several traditional techniques exist which might be employed to determine if viewed violence affects the attitudes of children, an unconventional measure was used in this study because it provided precise data obtained in a field setting.

Halloween is a time when children simultaneously dress as "their favorite character," and stores oblige by offering for sale many different types of costumes. If children choose their costumes without regard for the violent or nonviolent nature of the character, then, for children wearing commercially-produced costumes, the proportion with violent characters should approximate the proportion of costumes for sale that depict violent characters. For children wearing homemade costumes, one might predict approximately equal numbers of violent and nonviolent characters, although justification for this assumption is weak. If the proportion of

children dressed as violent characters exceeds the predicted proportions, it might be argued that violent models are more attractive than nonviolent models and that this appeal is related to the aggressive nature of the model.

Subjects The subjects were 88 male and 89 female students in grades kindergarten through 4.

Procedure Three large discount stores located close to the student's school were suggested by several parents as popular places to buy Halloween costumes. One experimenter visited each store three weeks before Halloween and again three days before Halloween, obtaining on each visit a complete list of the costumes on display. The experimenter entered the store as a customer and discreetly but openly recorded each of the costumes on a 4x5 card.

The main data of interest were collected by a first grade teacher during a school-wide parade in which each child wore his/her Halloween costume. Before the line for the parade had formed, the teacher asked each child, away from the other children, several predetermined questions and recorded all dialogue on a portable cassette recorder. Children were asked "Who are you dressed as?" and "Who picked out your costume?". If a child indicated that someone else had chosen the costume, the child was asked "What costume did you want to wear?". The teacher also noted on the recording whether the costume was homemade or commercially produced.

Results It was determined that 169 of the 177 children were wearing the costume they desired. The remaining eight all wore nonviolent characters and three of these wished to wear a violent character.

All three stores had essentially the same 88 costumes for sale, and these costumes remained available for sale three days prior to Halloween. A list was made of all costumes observed in the stores and all costumes mentioned by the subjects. Three raters classified each costume on the list as either a violent character or a nonviolent character, according to a definition related to the character's routine use of hitting, fighting, shooting, etc. The definition specified only behavior; it ignored the aggressor's intent or the consequences of the action. The raters agreed on 101 of the 104 costumes, and the modal rating was assigned to the other three.

(1st slide) Several chi-square goodness-of-fit tests indicated a very clear picture. This first slide deals with children wearing commercially produced costumes. The column on the left shows the obtained frequencies and the column on the right shows the partitioning that would be expected, based on the analysis of costumes for sale at local stores. The test indicated a significant difference between the numbers obtained and the numbers expected.

(2nd slide) This second slide presents the data for children wearing homemade costumes. The expected frequencies are based on the assumption that violent and nonviolent costumes have equal probability of being chosen, although the justification for this assumption is weak. The goodness-of-fit test indicated a significant difference, a difference that remains even if the predictions from the local stores are used.

The study reported was actually part of a larger study conducted on the same day, since data collection is limited to once a

year. On Halloween evening a total of 6 different observers in 4 different towns in 3 different states recorded the frequency of violent and nonviolent costumes worn by children going from door to door. These findings were consistent with the data just reported. The observers suggested that homemade costumes seemed to be chosen because they were convenient. Big brother's football outfit, mother's baggy cloths, and hobo attire were very popular, suggesting that the data for commercially produced costumes may be a more valid indicator of attraction or identification.

When all of the Halloween data are inspected, a curious although tangential finding emerges. Star Wars is a unique movie in that it presented an easily identified good-guy, Luke Skywalker, and an easily identified bad-guy, Darth Vader, each of which was violent and each of which received considerable exposure during the movie. It was discovered that Luke Skywalker costumes out-numbered Darth Vader costumes 16:1, suggesting that children confronted with several aggressive models may be more likely to identify with the "good-guy."

Discussion Data of this type can never show cause and effect, but they do suggest that children find violent models attractive. It is possible that identification with these models causes the child to adopt the model's attitudes or philosophy, even though the aggressive behavior itself is not copied. Since these data suggest that violent models are salient models, the child's appraisal of the world may also be affected.

Other studies have shown that heavy viewers of aggression become desensitized in that the physiological responses to viewed

aggression are attenuated in viewers watching over 25 hours of TV a week. I don't believe, however, that an habituation or desensitization process can explain these data. The ability to tolerate violence is very different from identification with the aggressor.

This study is obviously a first step. Several important variables were not taken into account, and most of you undoubtedly identified these as I was talking. Next Halloween I have to correlate amount of TV viewing with type of costume, I have to determine an individual child's favorite TV character,... But that's another paper.

PURCHASED

	OBTAINED	EXPECTED-STORES
VIOLENT	66	44
NONVIOLENT	38	60

$\chi^2 = 19.06$

$p < .001$

1ST SLIDE

HOMEMADE

	OBTAINED	EXPECTED-RANDOM	
VIOLENT	45	36.5	$X^2 = 3.96$
NONVIOLENT	28	36.5	$p < .05$

2ND SLIDE